ORBIT SHORT FICTION

JAMES S. A. COREY

THE BUTCHER OF ANDERSON STATION

A STORY OF THE EXPANSE

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A Story of The Expanse

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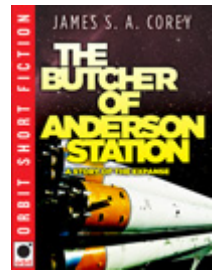

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The Butcher of Anderson Station

When Fred was a kid back on Earth, maybe five or six years old, he'd seen a weed growing in the darkness of his uncle's cellar. The plant had been pale and thin but twice as tall as the ones out in the side yard, deformed by reaching for the sunlight. The man behind the bar looked just like that: too tall, too pale, too hungry for something he'd never had and never would. Belters were all like that.

The music in the bar mixed Punjabi rhythms with a high-voiced woman rapping in the polyglot mess of languages that made up Belter Creole. The battered pachinko machine in the back rang and skittered. Hashish smoke sweetened the air. Fred leaned back on a bar stool meant for someone ten centimeters taller than he was and smiled gently.

"Is there a fucking problem?" he asked.

The bartender could have been Chinese or Korean or a mix of the two. Which meant his family had probably come up in one of the first waves. Five generations of grubbing for air, packing extended families into surveying ships with seven bunks, looking back at a sun that was hardly more than the brightest star. It was hard to think of any of them as human anymore.

"No problems, *jefe*," the bartender said, but didn't move. In the mirror behind the bar, Fred saw the door slide open. Four Belters slouched in. One had an armband with the split circle of the Outer Planets Alliance. Fred saw them see him. He saw one of them recognize him. The little trickle of adrenaline in his blood was automatic and pleasant.

"Then how about you serve me my drink?"

The barkeep didn't move for a time, and then he did. Whiskey poured differently in spin gravity, but not so much that Fred could tell quite what was wrong about it. The Coriolis of Ceres Station shouldn't have been enough to change the angle, not this close to the asteroid surface. Maybe it was just that it fell slowly. The bartender slid the glass across to him.

"On the house," the man said, then a half beat of silence. "Colonel."

Fred met his gaze. Neither spoke. Fred drank the liquor neat. It burned and left a taste at the back of his tongue like old mushrooms and bread mold.

"You have anything that isn't fermented fungus?" Fred asked.

"*Als u aprecie no, koai sa sa*?" a voice said from behind him. *If you don't like it, why are you here?*

Fred twisted in his seat. One of the four-pack who had just come in was glaring at him. He was broad-shouldered for a Belter. Mech driver, maybe. Or maybe he just spent a lot of time in the gym. Some of them did that, using machines and weights and expensive drug cocktails to give them what gravity never would.

Why are you here? Decent question.

"I like whiskey that used to be some kind of grain. You want to suck fungus, don't let me stop you."

The mech driver shifted in his seat. Fred thought he was going to get up, but instead the man shrugged and looked aside. His friends glanced at each other. The one with the armband had his hand terminal out and was tapping on the screen rapidly.

"I've got some bourbon came from Ganymede," the bartender said. "Cost you."

"Not enough to stop me," Fred said, turning back. "Bring the bottle."

The bartender bent down. His hand shuffled under the bar. There was probably a gun down there. Fred could almost picture it. Something designed to first intimidate, and if that failed, to put a man down. A shotgun, maybe, hack-sawed down for close range. Fred waited, but the man's hand came up with a bottle. He put it on the bar. Fred felt a quick rush of relief and disappointment.

"Clean glass," Fred said.

"So I think to myself," the bartender said, reaching back toward the glassware by the mirror, "you're here for something. The Butcher of Anderson Station in a Belter bar."

"I just want a drink," Fred said.

"No one just wants a drink," the bartender replied.

"I'm exceptional."

The bartender grinned.

"You are," he said, then bent low, his head almost level with Fred's. "Look at me, Colonel."

Fred unscrewed the cap from the bottle and poured two fingers into the new glass. He put the cap back. The bartender didn't move.

Fred met the pale brown eyes. He was about to say something, not even sure what it was besides cutting, belittling, and mean. In the mirror, something moved. Men, behind him.

Fred had a moment to brace himself for the knife or the bullet or the blow that didn't come before a black bag dropped over his head.

* * *

Three years before, everything had been different.

"*Dagmar* in the pipe, ninety seconds to contact, all green."

"Roger that, *Dagmar*. I show you go for breach in ninety—"

Fred chinned down the volume on the pilot's band, reducing their exchanges to faint background music with lyrics about positionals and vectors. Ninety seconds before the breaching team went in.

An eternity to wait.

Fred let out a long exhale that fogged the inside of his helmet for a second before it cleared. He tried to stretch, but the crash couch wouldn't let him extend his limbs fully in any direction. The command console showed eighty-three seconds to contact with Anderson Station. Breathing and stretching had burned only seven seconds.

He switched his display to the *Dagmar's* forward airlock. She was a Marine landing craft, built to lock on to a ship or station and cut a hole, and the display showed two hundred marines strapped to vertical crash cages, weapons locked into quick release clamps next to them. The airlock was designed to iris open once the breaching charges had made an opening and the exterior seals were latched on.

It was hard to tell when they were all in vacuum-rated combat armor, but the marines looked calm. They'd been trained on Luna until maneuvering in light or null gravity and vacuum was second nature. They were put in cramped ships until advancing down claustrophobic metal corridors with blind corners at every intersection didn't scare them. They were told that marines doing a full breaching action assault could expect as high as 60 percent casualties until that number stopped meaning anything.

Fred looked over his people in their cages and imagined six out of ten of them not coming back.

The readout said thirty seconds.

Fred switched his console to radar. Two large blips flanking the *Dagmar*. Her sister ships, each with two hundred marines of their own. Beyond them, the small, fast-moving escort ships. Ahead, growing closer by the second, the massive rotating ring of Anderson Station.

Everyone was in place, his troops were ready to go, diplomacy had failed and it was time to do his job. He opened the command channel to his squad leaders, ten variations on background static suddenly piping into his helmet.

"All squads, ten seconds to breach. Sound off."

Ten voices responded with the affirmative.

"Good hunting," Fred said, then pulled up his tactical display. The layout of Anderson Station appeared in a misleadingly crisp 2-D floor plan. No way to know how much fortifying the Belters might have done when they took over the station.

His soldiers showed up as six hundred green dots, hovering just outside the station.

"Breach, now! Now! Now!" the *Dagmar's* pilot yelled into the comms. The ship shuddered as the airlock claws sank into the metal of the station itself, a metallic shriek that Fred felt right through his padded chair. Gravity returned in a sideways lurch as the station began carrying the breaching ships along on its 0.3 g rotation. A series of high-pitched bangs sounded as the breaching charges went off.

Above his tactical display, ten smaller screens flickered on, his squad leaders activating their suits' helmet cameras. The marines poured through the three new holes in Anderson's skin. Fred flipped to the tactical floor plan, his fingers tapping against it.

"All squads establish beachhead and fallback position in Corridor L, from Junction 34 to Junction 38," Fred said into the comm, surprised as always by how calm his voice sounded during a battle.

Green dots moved through the corridors marked on his display. Sometimes new red dots appeared when a marine's HUD detected return fire and marked the individual as a threat. The red dots never lasted long. Every now and then a green dot shifted to yellow. A soldier down, their armored suits detecting the injuries or death that rendered them combat ineffective.

Combat ineffective. Such a nice euphemism for one of his kids bleeding out on a piece-of-shit station at the ass end of the Belt.

Sixty percent expected casualties. Four green dots for every six yellow, and each one of them his.

He watched the assault play out like a high-tech game, moving his pieces, reacting to threats with new orders, keeping score by tracking how many green dots stayed green.

Three red dots appeared. Four green dots stopped advancing and took cover. Fred sent four more green dots into a side passage, moving them into a flanking position. The red dots disappeared. The green dots moved again. It was tempting to get lost in the flow of it, to forget what all the glowing symbols on the screen actually meant.

The squad leader for his point team broke his reverie by calling him on the command channel.

"Overwatch, this is squad one actual."

Fred shifted his attention to the helmetcam view from squad one's leader. A makeshift barricade squatted at the other end of a long, gently sloping corridor. His tactical display marked a dozen or more hostiles defending it. As Fred watched, a small object hurtled over the barricade and detonated like a grenade just a few yards from his squad leader's position.

"Overwatch here, I read you, squad one actual," Fred replied.

"Heavily fortified position blocking access to the main corridor. Could clear it with heavy weapons, but there would be significant structural damage, and possible loss of life support in this section."

Fred glanced at the tactical map, noting the proximity of several key life support and power nodes to the barricade's position. *That's why they set up there. Because they think we won't.*

"Roger that, squad one," Fred replied, looking for an alternate route. There didn't seem to be one. The Belters were smart.

"Overwatch, interrogative. Use heavy weapons to clear the barricade, or clear by advancing?"

Blow up a big chunk of the station's life support, killing who knows how many civilians hiding in their rooms, or send his men in and let them soak up their 60 percent casualties to take the position.

Fuck that. The Belters had made their decision. Let them live with the consequences.

"Squad one actual, you are authorized for heavy weapons use to clear this obstruction. Overwatch out."

A few seconds later, the barricade vanished in a flash of light

and a cloud of smoke. Seconds after that, his people were on the move again.

Three hours and twenty-three yellow dots later, the call came. "Overwatch, this is squad one actual. The command center is taken. The station is ours. Repeat, the station is ours."

* * *

His arms, tied behind him, ached. Bound at the ankles, he could either lay on his side or lever himself up to his knees. He couldn't straighten his legs to stand. He chose kneeling.

The darkness of the sack over his head was absolute, but judging from the spin gravity, he was somewhere near the station's outer skin. An airlock, then. He'd hear the hiss and pop as the inner door sealed. Then either the slow exhalation of evacuated air or, if they were looking to blow him out into space, the cough of the security override. He ran his feet across the floor, trying to find the seams. Would it slide open, or was it one of the old hinged designs?

The sound that came wasn't mechanical. Somewhere to his left, a woman cleared her throat. A few seconds later, a door opened, then closed. It had the soft sound of a pressure seal, but that didn't mean much on station. Most doors were airtight. Footsteps approached him. Five people. Maybe six. The woman with the tickle in her throat wasn't one of them.

"Colonel? I'm going to take that sack off now."

Fred nodded.

Light returned to the world.

The room was cheap flooring and raw stone. Conduits and ducts ran across the ceiling and walls, and a squat metal desk sat unused in one corner. A service tunnel. The lights were harsh. He recognized the four men from the bar. Another man had joined them. Thin, young, with a case of acne that deserved medical attention. Fred craned his neck to see the woman. She stood at attention, a fifty-year-old fléchette rifle in her hands, and the split-circle armband of the OPA on her bicep.

None of them were wearing masks. When the new man spoke, his voice wasn't modified. They didn't care whether Fred could identify them.

"Colonel Frederick Lucius Johnson. I've been looking forward to meeting you. My name is Anderson Dawes. I work for the OPA."

"Anderson, eh?" Fred said, and the man shrugged.

"My parents named me after the Anderson-Hyosung Cooperative Industries Group. I think I got off pretty light, all things considered."

"So what? Anderson Station was like a brother to you?"

"Namesake. Call me Dawes, if it's more comfortable."

"Fuck yourself, Dawes."

Dawes nodded, knelt down facing Fred.

"*Chi-chey au*?" one of the men from the bar asked.

"*Etchyeh*," Dawes said, and the men walked away. Dawes waited until the door closed behind them before he went on. "You've been spending a lot of time in Belter bars, Colonel. Someone might think you were looking for something."

"Dawes?"

"Fred?"

"I've been through better interrogation training than you'll ever see. You want to build rapport? Go for it. Talk for a while, take my shackles off, start telling me that you can save me if I just tell you what I know. And then I'll rip your eyes out and skull-fuck you. You understand?"

"I do," Dawes said, not missing a beat. "So tell me, Fred. What happened to you on Anderson Station?"

* * *

Once the skirmishers had finished sweeping the corridors for stragglers, a detachment of marines escorted Fred into the conquered station. He paused at the fallback position they'd set up just outside the airlock doors. Marines were beginning to return there from other assignments. They were hopped-up on adrenaline and twitchy with post-combat fear. Fred let them see him. He put his hands on their shoulders and told them they'd done a good job.

Some of them came back on stretchers. Yellow dots made flesh. The corpsmen hurried among them, plugging their hand terminals into ports in the downed soldiers' combat armor, reading the diagnostics, then assigning their place in line for surgery based on the severity of their wounds. Sometimes they tapped a button on their terminal and one of Fred's yellow dots shifted to black. His command software flagged the fatality and sent a message to the appropriate squad leader and company commander to write a letter

to the family. His own task list received a matching entry.

It was all very clean, very organized. Centuries of warfare in the electronic age had distilled it to this. Fred put his hand on the arm of a young woman whose suit was reporting severe spinal injuries, and squeezed. She gave him a thumbs-up that felt like a punch to the solar plexus.

"Sir?"

Fred looked up and found his first lieutenant standing at attention. "Are we ready?"

"Yes, sir. Might be a straggler or two, but we control the corridors from here to Ops."

"Take me there," Fred said.

They covered the ground it had taken his marines hours to win in just a few minutes. The post-combat cleanup teams were still in the breaching ships, waiting for the all clear. Scattered along the corridors lay the bodies of the fallen enemy. Fred looked them over. Other than a noticeable lack of OPA insignias, they were pretty much what he would have expected. Long, thin men and women blasted open by explosives, or repeatedly punctured by small-arms fire. Most were armed, but a few weren't.

They rounded a corner into the main corridor and then came to the barricade he'd ordered destroyed. Over a dozen bodies lay around it. Some wore makeshift armor, but most were in simple environment suits. The concussion rocket his marines had used to clear the corridor had burst them like overripe grapes. Fred's vacuum-rated armor protected him from the smell of viscera, but it reported it to him as a slight increase in atmospheric methane levels. The stench of death reduced to a data point.

A small pile of weapons and makeshift explosives lay nearby.

"That's what they were armed with?" Fred asked.

His escort nodded.

"Pretty light stuff, sir. Civilian grade. Most of it wouldn't even make a dent in our armor."

Fred bent over and picked up a homemade grenade.

"They threw bombs at you to keep you from getting close enough to realize their guns wouldn't work."

The lieutenant laughed. "And made us frag the lot of them. If we'd known they were packing peashooters, we could have just walked up and tased them."

Fred shook his head and put the grenade back down.

“Get a demolitions team to come clear these explosives before this homemade shit goes off and kills someone.”

He looked at the nearby life support node that had been wrecked by their concussion rocket. *Enough bystanders have died today.* Fred called up the station status report his cyberops team was updating by the minute. They showed a total loss of life support in the section he was in, and in two neighboring sections. Just over eleven hundred people with no air and no power. Every door he could see might have a family behind it who’d gasped out their last breaths banging to get out because a bunch of idiot Belters had built their barricades where they did. And because he’d chosen to destroy it.

While his lieutenant called for a bomb-disposal unit, Fred walked toward the command center. Along the way he saw a few more Belter corpses. They’d tried to hold the corridor even after his people had blown up the first barricade, hiding behind makeshift barriers and throwing their bathtub-brewed explosives. Buying time, but for what? The final result had never been in doubt. They’d been undermanned and grossly underequipped. The only reason his soldiers had taken three hours was that Fred had insisted on moving cautiously. Looking at the unarmored bodies on the floor, he realized they could have had men in the command center in half that time.

They had to have known it too, these people spread across the floor around him. *The idiots made us kill them.*

His lieutenant caught up with him just as he was entering the command center. Corpses filled the room, easily twenty of them. While most of them wore some form of environment suit or another, one man in the center of the room wore only a cheap blue jumpsuit with a mining company logo on the shoulder. He’d been shot dozens of times. A small-caliber pistol was glued to one hand with his own blood.

“The leader, we think,” his escort said. “He was doing some kind of broadcast. The others fought to the last man to buy him time. We tried to take him alive, but he pulled that little gun out of his pocket, and…”

Fred looked at the carnage around him and felt a disquieting sensation in his belly. It lasted only a moment, and then was replaced by a white-hot anger. If he’d been alone, he would have gone to the dead man in the cheap blue jumpsuit and kicked him. Instead, Fred gritted his teeth.

“What the fuck was wrong with you people?” he demanded of the dead.

“Sir?” his lieutenant said, looking at the comms station. “Looks like he was trying to broadcast right up to the last minute.”

“Let me see it,” Fred said.

* * *

“What happened on Anderson Station was that I did my duty,” Fred said.

“Your duty,” Dawes echoed. He didn’t make it a question. He didn’t mock it. He just repeated the words.

“Yes.”

“Following orders, then,” Dawes said.

“Don’t even try it, asshole. That Nuremberg crap won’t work on me. I followed orders in that I was instructed by my superior officers to retake the station from the terrorist forces occupying it. I judged that order to be legal and appropriate, and everything that came after was my responsibility. I took the station, and I did so while trying to minimize, first, loss of life to my people and, second, damage to the station.”

Dawes looked at him. Tiny frown lines competed with his acne. Something in the ductwork clacked, hissed, then clacked again, and stopped.

“You were told to do something. You did it,” Dawes said. “How is that not following orders?”

“I gave the orders,” Fred said. “And I did what I did because I judged it to be right.”

“Okay.”

“You’re trying to give me wiggle room. Let me say that the Belters who died on Anderson died because the guy above me made a call. That’s shit.”

“And why would I be doing that?” Dawes asked. He was good. He seemed genuinely curious.

“Build rapport.”

Dawes nodded, then frowned and looked pained.

“And then we’re back to the skull-fucking?” Dawes asked with a grimace. Before he could stop himself, Fred laughed.

“This isn’t what I’m here for, Colonel,” Dawes went on, “and I don’t want to get sidetracked, but doesn’t that go the other way

too? You didn't fire a shot. You didn't touch a trigger or key in a launch code. You gave orders, but your soldiers judged them to be just and legal."

"Because they were," Fred said. "My people did the right thing."

"Because you told them to," Dawes said. "They were following your orders."

"Yes."

"Your responsibility."

"Yes."

The woman with the antique rifle coughed again. Dawes lowered himself to the cheap flooring, sitting with legs crossed. Even then, he was half a head taller than Fred. His skin was pale where it wasn't red. Between the zits and the gawky-elongated build, Dawes looked like a teenager. Except around the eyes.

"And the terrorists," Dawes said.

"What?"

"The men who took the station. You think it was their responsibility too, yes?"

"Yes," Fred said.

Dawes took a long breath, letting the air curl out slowly from between his teeth.

"You're aware, Colonel, that the assault on Anderson is one of the best documented military actions in history. The security cameras broadcast everything. I've spent months playing those streams. I can tell you things about the assault you don't even know."

"If you say so."

"When the barricade blew, eleven people died in the blast. Three more stopped breathing in the next two minutes, and the last two survived until your people came."

"We didn't kill the injured."

"You killed one when he tried to bring his pistol up. The other one had a collapsed lung and choked on her own blood before your medics looked at her."

"You want an apology?"

Dawes's smile was cooler now.

"I want you to understand that I know every action that was taken on the station. Every order. Every shot fired, and from what gun. I know everything about that assault, and so does half the Belt. You're famous out here."

“You’re the one who asked what happened,” Fred said, shrugging as best he could with bound, numb arms.

“No, Colonel. I asked what happened to *you*.”

* * *

General Jasira’s private office was decorated like somebody’s idea of a British gentleman’s club. The furniture was all dark oak and darker leather. The heavy desk smelled like lemons and tung oil. The pen set and globe of Earth on top of it were both made of brass. The bookshelves were filled with real paper books and other souvenirs from a long lifetime of constant travel. There wasn’t an electronic device more complex than a lamp anywhere in sight. If it weren’t for the 0.17 lunar gravity, there would be no way to know it wasn’t an office in London in the early twentieth century.

The general was waiting for him to speak first, so Fred swirled the scotch in his glass instead, enjoying the sound the ice made and the harsh smell of the liquor. He drained it in one swallow, then set it back on the desktop in front of him, an invitation to be refilled.

As Jasira put another two fingers into it, he finally gave up on waiting. He said, “I imagine you’ve had some time to review the video the terrorists transmitted from Anderson.”

Fred nodded. He’d guessed this was the reason for the after-hours invitation. He tried another sip of scotch, but it had taken on a sour taste, and he put it back down.

“Yes, sir, I have. We were jamming radio all the way in, as per protocol, but we didn’t detect that little tightbeam relay they’d left —”

“Fred,” Jasira interjected with a laugh. “This isn’t an inquisition. You aren’t here to apologize. You did *good*, Colonel.”

Fred frowned, picked his glass up, then put it back down without taking a drink.

“Then to be frank, sir, I wonder what I *am* here for.”

Jasira leaned back in his chair.

“A couple of little things. I saw your request for an investigation into the negotiation team’s work. The declassification of the negotiation transcripts. That surprised me.”

As he spoke, Jasira rolled his shoulders, though in the moon’s fractional gravity they could hardly be tense. He must have spent a lot of time dirtside, and the habits died slow.

“Sir,” Fred said, speaking slowly and picking his words carefully, “because of the relay, the public has already seen the battle footage. We can’t put that genie back in the bottle. But no one seems to want to talk about the tightbeam they sent to us at the end there. We—”

“And how will this information change anything? You did your job, soldier. The negotiation team did theirs. End of story.”

“As it stands, sir, the people who took Anderson look like they’re insane, and we look like executioners,” Fred said, then stopped when he realized his voice was getting loud. Quieting down, he said, “There was some kind of mistake. That second message makes it clear that they thought they’d surrendered. A lot of people died over that miscommunication.”

Jasira smiled, but there was no humor in it.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You barely lost anybody,” the general said. “Anyway, the request’s denied. We have no reason to do any investigation on this matter. The battle footage is out, and as it stands that works in our favor. The simpler the message is, the more people will understand it: Take one of our stations, and we take it back. Hard. We can only confuse the issue by turning it political.”

“Sir,” Fred said, all warmth gone from his voice. “I killed 173 armed insurgents and over a thousand civilians in this action. You owe it to those people—you owe it to *me*—to show we did the right thing. What if we can avoid this happening next time?”

“There isn’t going to be a next time,” the general said. “You’re the one who saw to that.”

“Sir, you’re making it seem very much like this wasn’t a mistake at all. Who gave the order to ignore their surrender and send me in? Was it you?”

Jasira shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. You did what we needed you to do. We won’t forget that.”

Fred looked at his hands. He rose to his feet, a little too quickly, bouncing in the low g, and snapped a sharp salute. Jasira poured himself another glass of scotch and drank it off, leaving Fred standing as he did.

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

Jasira gave him a long, resigned look.

“They’re giving you the Medal of Freedom.”

Fred’s arm turned limp, and his salute collapsed under its own

weight.

"What?" was all he could manage to say.

"I'm going back down the well. I'm too old to suck vacuum anymore. They'll pin you with the UN Marines highest honor, then shortly thereafter give you your first star. You'll have a seat here at OPCOM before the year is out. Try to look happy about it."

* * *

The silence stretched. Fred focused hard on nothing about ten feet in front of him. Dawes watched him for almost a full minute, then gave up.

"All right. Why don't I start, then?" Dawes said. "Here's what happened. You were sleeping with one of the marines. Keeping it quiet because you were the commander, and that's a no-no, right? So you're very careful taking the station. You keep your casualties low, but you don't get lucky and your lover dies."

Fred kept his face stony and still. Dawes leaned back, resting on one long, thin arm like he was lounging under a tree in some sunlit park.

"You can't get the usual psychological support," Dawes went on, "because that would mean exposing the relationship, and you're still ashamed of it. You have a little breakdown. You end up knocking around OPA bars hoping someone'll kill you."

Fred didn't respond. His legs were past numb now and starting to hurt. Dawes grinned. He seemed to be enjoying this.

"No?" the OPA man said. "Don't like that one? All right. How about this? Before you joined up with the Marines, you were a troubled kid. Did all kinds of bad things. Wild. Joining up is what straightened you out. Made you into the staunch, upright, legal, and appropriate guy you are today. But then the Anderson Station broadcast comes out. A bunch of people from your past see the feed and someone recognizes you. You come back a hero, but there's a sting in it. You're being blackmailed for…mmm. How about rape? Or, no. Drug trafficking. You used to cook tabs of grace in your dorm room, sell it at the clubs. Now it's come back to haunt you, and you have a little breakdown. And you end up knocking around OPA bars hoping someone'll kill you."

Dawes waved a hand in front of Fred's eyes.

"Still with me, Colonel? Don't like that one either? All right.

Maybe you've got a sister who came up the well, and you lost track of her—"

"Why don't you save your fucking air," Fred growled. "Whatever you're here for, do it and be done."

"Because *why* matters, Colonel. *Why* always matters. Whatever your story is, I know how it ends. It ends with you, here, talking to me. That's the easy part, and I think you're here looking for easy."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

The woman with the rifle said something. Either her Belter patois was too accented and fast or it was some OPA verbal code because Fred couldn't even cut the flow of syllables into individual words. Dawes nodded, took his hand terminal out of a pocket and keyed something in. Fred leaned forward, trying to get the blood flow back into his legs. Dawes put the hand terminal away.

"You changed, Colonel. The way you behave changed after Anderson Station. Before that, you were just another inner planets asshole who didn't give a shit whether the Belt lived or died. You stuck to your bases and your stage-managed outreach programs and the station levels where the security gets paid by Earth taxes. And now, you're not.

"I've lived in the Belt my whole life. I've known a lot of men who wanted to die. They act just like you. Women don't. I haven't figured that out yet, but the men? Even if they do take a walk outside or swallow a gun, there's always this part before. Taking risks. Hoping the universe will do it for them. Make it easy. And the Belt's an unforgiving environment. You want to die, getting sloppy's usually enough."

"I don't give a shit what you think," Fred said. "I don't give a shit what you want, or who you know. And your popular psychology horseshit? Yeah, you can drink it with milk. I have nothing to justify to you. I did my job, and I'm not ashamed of any decision I made. With the same information, I'd do the same thing again."

"*With the same information*," Dawes said, latching on to the phrase hard. "You found something out, then?"

"Fuck off, Dawes."

"What was it, Colonel? What kind of information turns the Butcher of Anderson Station into a suicide? What makes him into a coward?"

* * *

The hundred and seventy Belters occupying Anderson Station hadn't taken offensive action yet. Fred watched the station in false-color IR.

"Priority flash traffic from OPCOM, sir, cross-checked and verified," the intel officer on his monitor said. "Eyes only. Sending it to you now."

There was only one line of text.

AUTHORIZATION TO RETAKE STATION GRANTED.

And that was that. Thirty-seven hours of negotiation was over. Outer Planets Command was tired of waiting, and they were unleashing the dogs.

Fred called up the company major and said, "Put them in their racks. We're go for assault. Set the countdown timer to one hour."

"Roger that, sir," the major said with more glee than Fred was comfortable seeing.

One hour until they went into the station. Fred called up the negotiation team on the command ship.

"Psych ops here," said Captain Santiago, the team commander.

"Captain, this is Colonel Johnson. We've been given authorization to retake the station. My people go in in an hour. Do we have anything left to try? A Hail Mary pass? Have you warned them about the assault?"

There was no reason for secrecy. There would be no way to hide three Marine assault craft on breaching maneuvers.

The silence from the other end stretched out, and Fred was almost at the point of checking to see if the line was still open when the reply came.

"Colonel, are you double-checking my work here, sir?"

Fred counted to ten slowly.

"No, Captain. But I'm about to send six hundred marines into the station. In addition to the 170 hostiles, there are over ten thousand civilians. Many or all of them could die before the day's out. I just want to make sure we've exhausted every other possibility before we commit to—"

"Sir, I've got my orders just like you do. We did what we could, but Psych Ops is standing down now. Your turn."

"Am I the only one that sees that this doesn't make any sense?" Fred said. "They claim they took the station because of a three

percent cargo transfer fee? I mean, they already threw the administrator who implemented it out the damned airlock. There is literally nothing left for them to win by forcing a fight."

The only answer was static.

"Let me talk to them," Fred said. "Maybe if they hear it from a different voice, they'll understand—"

"Sir," Santiago cut in. "I am not authorized to do that. You want to argue about it? Call General Jasira back at OPCOM. Santiago out."

* * *

Fred launched himself at Dawes, pushing out with numbed legs, and Dawes scuttled back. Fred landed on the deck hard. The world grayed out for a second, and he tasted blood. He struggled forward, trying to get at Dawes's feet with his teeth if that was the best he could manage. He saw the Belter up to the knees, stepping back. Fred twisted. Something in his left shoulder made a sick crunching sound, and a sharp pain shot up his neck. Then the woman stepped forward.

He looked up into the triangular barrel of the fléchette rifle, and then past it to the woman's eyes. They were the blue of oceans seen from orbit. There was no pity in them. Her thumb was on the safety. Her finger on the trigger. A little pressure, and the rifle would send a hundred spikes of steel thinner than needles through his brain. And she wanted to. It was in the set of her shoulders and the angles of her face how much she wanted to end him.

"The problem with you," Dawes said, his voice calm and conversational as if they were sitting in a bar somewhere sharing a beer, "and I don't mean this as a criticism of you in particular. It's true of anybody who didn't grow up in the Belt. The problem with you is that you are wasteful."

"I'm not a fucking coward," Fred said through his rapidly swelling lip.

"Of course you are. You're smart, you're healthy. Maybe a few hundred people out of forty billion have your combination of talent and training. And you're trying to waste that very valuable resource. You're like the guy who delays replacing his airlock seals when they start to leak. You think it's just a little bit. It doesn't matter. You're one guy. You get killed, no big loss."

He heard Dawes walking behind him, but his gaze was still on the rifle. Dawes grabbed Fred's collar and hauled him back to kneeling.

"When I was growing up, my dad used to beat the crap out of me if I spat someplace other than the reclamation duct because we needed the water. We don't waste things out here, Colonel. We can't afford to. You understand that, though. Don't you?"

Slowly, Fred nodded. Blood was seeping down his chin even though Dawes and the woman hadn't laid an angry hand on him. He'd done this to himself.

"When I was about fifteen, I killed my sister," Dawes said. "I didn't mean to. We were on this rock about a week from Eros Station. We were going out of the ship to get some survey probes that got stuck in the slurry. I was supposed to check her suit seals, but I was in a mood. I was fifteen, you know? So I did a half-assed job of it. We went outside, and everything seemed fine until she twisted sideways to pull up a rock spur. I heard it on the comm link, and it just sounded like a pop. We had the old Ukrainian-style suits. Solid as stone unless something broke, and then it all failed at once."

Dawes shrugged.

"You're a fucking piece of shit, then, aren't you?" Fred said, and Dawes grinned.

"Felt like that, yeah. Still do sometimes. I understand why someone could want to die after a thing like that."

"So why not kill yourself?" Fred asked, then spat a dark red clot on the deck at his feet.

"I've got three more sisters," Dawes said. "Someone's got to check their seals."

Fred shook his head. His shoulder vibrated with sudden pain.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Builds rapport," Dawes said. "How's it working?"

Fred laughed before he knew he was going to. Dawes gestured, and the woman put up the rifle, walking back to her doorway.

"So. Colonel," Dawes said. "What information did you get on Anderson Station that you ended up here talking to a sad sack of shit like me?"

Fred took a long breath.

"There was a message sent to us as we went in," he said. "A message I didn't see until it was too late."

* * *

"Let me see it," Fred said.

"There are a couple things here," the lieutenant said. "Got a partial that was never sent. And one that looks like it's being sent to the command ship on infinite repeat. Also, a running feed that looks like a straight dump of the security cameras."

"Do the unsent partial first."

The video started, and the man in the mining jumpsuit stared out of the screen. For Fred, there was a surreal quality to watching a man alive and speaking while his corpse lay cooling on the floor behind him.

I could have told him this would happen.

The dead man said, "Citizens of the solar system, my name is Marama Brown. I'm a freelance mining technician for Anderson-Hyosung Cooperative Industries Group. I, and some like-minded individuals, have taken control of the company resupply station."

Fred hit pause and turned to his lieutenant. He had a sinking feeling in his gut. The dead man had expected this to get out. Even though he had to know they were jamming, he'd expected the message to be heard.

"Where was that security camera feed going?" Fred asked.

"I'll check on that right now, sir," the lieutenant replied, and called up the electronic warfare people back on the *Dagmar*. Fred tuned their conversation out, and hit play again.

"I believe—we all believe that this action is justified by what has been done here. A man named Gustav Marconi, the station administrator, recently implemented a three percent surcharge on supply transfers. I know that doesn't sound like much to some of you, but most of us are living on the ragged edge out here. Prospectors, wildcat miners…you strike it rich or you starve. That's the game. But now a bunch of us are going to have to buy three percent less supplies because it just got that much more expensive. You can eat a bit less food. You can drink a little less water. You can fly a little slower and stretch your fuel, maybe. You run life support at bare minimums. But—"

"Sir?" said the lieutenant, and Fred paused the playback. "Sir, the transmission, at least some of it, got out. They'd left a tightbeam receiver and broadcast transmitter anchored to a rock just outside

our jamming range. We missed it. But the e-war geeks have triangulated its location and are sending a Phantom to frag it."

Too late, Fred thought, and hit the play button again.

"—what if you're already running at the bare minimum? How about every year, you just don't breathe for three days? That would about cover it. Or you don't drink any water for three days. Or you don't eat for three days when you're already on the brink of starvation. When there's nothing left to cut back on, how do you make it up then?"

Marama turned away from the camera for a second, and when he turned back he was holding his hand terminal. He held it up to the screen. It was displaying the picture of a little girl. She was wearing a powder-blue jumpsuit that had "Hinekiri" hand stitched on the breast, and grinning with small crooked teeth.

"This is my little girl, my Kiri. She's four. She has what the medics call 'hypoxic brain injury.' She was born a little prematurely, and instead of the high oxygen environment she should have had, she was in my prospecting ship where the air is a little thinner than the Everest base camps back on Earth. We didn't even know anything was wrong until we realized she wasn't developing normally."

He turned away from the camera and put the terminal down.

"And she's not the only one. Developmental problems arising from low oxygen and malnutrition are becoming more and more common. When this was explained to Mr. Marconi, his reply was, 'Work harder and you can afford the increase.' We complained to the Anderson-Hyosung head offices, but no one listened. We complained to the Outer Planets Governing Board on Luna.

"This isn't… We didn't start out intending to take over the station. It all just sort of happened," the man said. For a moment, his voice seemed to waver. As Fred watched, the man forced himself back into calm. "We want everyone to know that, other than Mr. Marconi, whose crimes would have led directly to the deaths of thousands of Belters, no one has been harmed in our taking of the station. We don't want anyone else to get hurt. We're not violent people, but we have been pushed so far that there is nowhere left to retreat to. We've been in discussions with a UN military negotiator for almost two days now. In a short time, we will be surrendering the station to them. We'll send this message out prior to handing the station over to make sure our story is

heard. I hope no one ever feels like they have to do something like this again. I hope, after all of this, that people can begin talking about what's happening out here."

The video ended. Fred queued up the tightbeam that had been sent to the negotiation team during the assault.

Marama Brown again, this time holding a pistol, his face twisted with fear.

"Why are the Marines attacking?" he said in a panicked screech. "We just needed some time! We're surrendering!"

The message immediately repeated. Fred stopped it and turned it off.

"Sir."

Fred took a long breath to fight back the vague nausea he suddenly felt.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Phantom reports a clean hit. The relay is toast. But, uh…"

"Spit it out, soldier."

"It was no longer broadcasting. Whatever they sent, they were done sending it."

Fred pulled up the comm logs, and confirmed what he'd already suspected: Marama Brown had never gotten to send his manifesto. Fred had been ordered in, and Marama had been busy trying to stay alive. But his last tightbeam to Psych Ops had gotten through just fine. They'd known.

"Sir?" the lieutenant said.

"Doesn't matter. Call up the cyber wonks and have them strip the computer core. I'll go find the liaison officer and start the civilian aid phase."

His lieutenant chuckled.

"Here, kiddies," the lieutenant said. "We blew the shit out of your station, have some free MREs and UN Marine sticker books."

Fred didn't laugh.

* * *

"You had to have known that they were desperate out there," Dawes said.

"Of course I did," Fred said. "It was in all the reports. Hell, it was on the news feeds. Increased overhead. People struggling for the basics. You hear it all the time. Turn on a feed now, you'll hear it

again."

The blood had stopped flowing from Fred's mouth, but the inside of his lip tasted raw. His shoulder was settling into a low, radiating ache. There was a dark circle of blood on the decking in front of him.

"But this time it was different?" Dawes said. He didn't sound sarcastic or angry. Just curious.

Fred shifted. His legs were dead lumps of meat. He couldn't feel anything. If someone put a knife into his thigh, it would have been like watching it happen to someone else.

"That man had a crippled baby girl," Fred said. "I killed him."

"The UN would just have sent someone else," Dawes said.

"I still killed him."

"You didn't pull the trigger."

"I killed him because he wanted her to have enough air to breathe," Fred said. "I killed her daddy while he was trying to surrender, and they gave me a medal for doing it. So there you go. That's what happened on Anderson Station. What are you going to do about it?"

Dawes shook his head.

"That's too easy. You've killed lots of daddies. What made this one different?"

Fred started to speak, stopped, tried again.

"They used me. They made it about sending messages to everyone that you don't fuck with Earth, because look at the shit we'll do just because you spaced an administrator on a nowhere station. They made me the poster boy for disproportional response. They made me a butcher."

Saying the words was painful, but there was a strange relief too. Dawes was staring at him, his face unreadable. Fred couldn't meet his eyes.

Dawes nodded, seeming to come to a decision, then put a hand in his pocket and took out a utility knife. When he opened it, the blade was old and scored. Fred took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was ready. Dawes walked behind him. A fast pull across the neck, and Fred could bleed out in four minutes. A stab in the kidney could take hours. Cut the cords that were tying his arms, and it could take years.

Dawes cut the cords.

"This wasn't a trial," Fred said. "You're not here to pass some

kind of judgment on me."

"I wasn't expecting to," Dawes said. "I mean, if it really had been just that you'd been boning one of your marines, I'd have dropped you out an airlock, wasteful or no. But I was pretty sure I was right."

"So what happens now?"

Dawes shifted Fred forward. The pins-and-needles feeling was starting in his hands. Dawes cut the binding on his legs.

"If you want the easy way out, you go kill yourself on your own damn time and stop setting the OPA up to take the blame for it. I've got enough bad press without slaughtering the hero of Anderson Station."

"And otherwise?"

Dawes sat back on his haunches and closed the blade with one hand.

"I don't waste resources, Colonel. If you want to die, it will do that girl and her father absolutely no good. If you want to make it up to her and all the people like her, I could use your expertise. You're a rare resource. You've got knowledge and training, and as the man who is famous throughout the whole system for killing Belters, you're in a position to be our strongest advocate. All it means is walking away from everything you know and love. The life you built for yourself. The admiration of everyone who looks up to you. All the things you'd have lost anyway."

"This was a recruitment, then."

Dawes stood up, sliding the knife into his pocket. His smile reached his eyes this time.

"You tell me," Dawes said. Then, to the woman, "*Recanos ai postar. Asi geendig*."

"*Aiis*," she said, shouldering the rifle like a professional.

The pair walked out together, leaving Fred on the deck, massaging the agony out of his legs as the feeling started to return.

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James S. A. Corey is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Find out more about this series at www.the-expanse.com.

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LEVIATHAN WAKES

BOOK 1 OF THE THE EXPANSE
by James S. A. Corey

Prologue: Julie

The *Scopuli* had been taken eight days ago, and Julie Mao was finally ready to be shot.

It had taken all eight days trapped in a storage locker for her to get to that point. For the first two she'd remained motionless, sure that the armored men who'd put her there had been serious. For the first hours, the ship she'd been taken aboard wasn't under thrust, so she floated in the locker, using gentle touches to keep herself from bumping into the walls or the atmosphere suit she shared the space with. When the ship began to move, thrust giving her weight, she'd stood silently until her legs cramped, then sat down slowly into a fetal position. She'd peed in her jumpsuit, not caring about the warm itchy wetness, or the smell, worrying only that she might slip and fall in the wet spot it left on the floor. She couldn't make noise. They'd shoot her.

On the third day, thirst had forced her into action. The noise of the ship was all around her. The faint subsonic rumble of the reactor and drive. The constant hiss and thud of hydraulics and steel bolts as the pressure doors between decks opened and closed. The clump of heavy boots walking on metal decking. She waited until all the noise she could hear sounded distant, then pulled the environment suit off its hooks and onto the locker floor. Listening for any approaching sound, she slowly disassembled the suit and took out the water supply. It was old and stale; the suit obviously hadn't been used or serviced in ages. But she hadn't had a sip in days, and the warm loamy water in the suit's reservoir bag was the best thing she had ever tasted. She had to work hard not to gulp it down and make herself vomit.

When the urge to urinate returned, she pulled the catheter bag out of the suit and relieved herself into it. She sat on the floor, now cushioned by the padded suit and almost comfortable, and wondered who her captors were—Coalition Navy, pirates, something worse. Sometimes she slept.

* * *

On day four, isolation, hunger, boredom, and the diminishing number of places to store her piss finally pushed her to make contact with them. She'd heard muffled cries of pain. Somewhere nearby, her shipmates were being beaten or tortured. If she got the attention of the kidnappers, maybe they would just take her to the others. That was okay. Beatings, she could handle. It seemed like a small price to pay if it meant seeing people again.

The locker sat beside the inner airlock door. During flight, that usually wasn't a high-traffic area, though she didn't know anything about the layout of this particular ship. She thought about what to say, how to present herself. When she finally heard someone moving toward her, she just tried to yell that she wanted out. The dry rasp that came out of her throat surprised her. She swallowed, working her tongue to try to create some saliva, and tried again. Another faint rattle in the throat.

The people were right outside her locker door. A voice was talking quietly. Julie had pulled back a fist to bang on the door when she heard what it was saying.

No. Please no. Please don't.

Dave. Her ship's mechanic. Dave, who collected clips from old cartoons and knew a million jokes, begging in a small broken voice.

No, please no, please don't, he said.

Hydraulics and locking bolts clicked as the inner airlock door opened. A meaty thud as something was thrown inside. Another click as the airlock closed. A hiss of evacuating air.

When the airlock cycle had finished, the people outside her door walked away. She didn't bang to get their attention.

* * *

They'd scrubbed the ship. Detainment by the inner planet navies was a bad scenario, but they'd all trained on how to deal with it.

Sensitive OPA data was scrubbed and overwritten with innocuous-looking logs with false time stamps. Anything too sensitive to trust to a computer, the captain destroyed. When the attackers came aboard, they could play innocent.

It hadn't mattered.

There weren't the questions about cargo or permits. The invaders had come in like they owned the place, and Captain Darren had rolled over like a dog. Everyone else—Mike, Dave, Wan Li—they'd all just thrown up their hands and gone along quietly. The pirates or slavers or whatever they were had dragged them off the little transport ship that had been her home, and down a docking tube without even minimal environment suits. The tube's thin layer of Mylar was the only thing between them and hard nothing: hope it didn't rip; goodbye lungs if it did.

Julie had gone along too, but then the bastards had tried to lay their hands on her, strip her clothes off.

Five years of low-gravity jiu jitsu training and them in a confined space with no gravity. She'd done a lot of damage. She'd almost started to think she might win when from nowhere a gauntleted fist smashed into her face. Things got fuzzy after that. Then the locker, and *Shoot her if she makes a noise.* Four days of not making noise while they beat her friends down below and then threw one of them out an airlock.

After six days, everything went quiet.

Shifting between bouts of consciousness and fragmented dreams, she was only vaguely aware as the sounds of walking, talking, and pressure doors and the subsonic rumble of the reactor and the drive faded away a little at a time. When the drive stopped, so did gravity, and Julie woke from a dream of racing her old pinnace to find herself floating while her muscles screamed in protest and then slowly relaxed.

She pulled herself to the door and pressed her ear to the cold metal. Panic shot through her until she caught the quiet sound of the air recyclers. The ship still had power and air, but the drive wasn't on and no one was opening a door or walking or talking. Maybe it was a crew meeting. Or a party on another deck. Or everyone was in engineering, fixing a serious problem.

She spent a day listening and waiting.

By day seven, her last sip of water was gone. No one on the ship had moved within range of her hearing for twenty-four hours. She

sucked on a plastic tab she'd ripped off the environment suit until she worked up some saliva; then she started yelling. She yelled herself hoarse.

No one came.

By day eight, she was ready to be shot. She'd been out of water for two days, and her waste bag had been full for four. She put her shoulders against the back wall of the locker and planted her hands against the side walls. Then she kicked out with both legs as hard as she could. The cramps that followed the first kick almost made her pass out. She screamed instead.

Stupid girl, she told herself. She was dehydrated. Eight days without activity was more than enough to start atrophy. At least she should have stretched out.

She massaged her stiff muscles until the knots were gone, then stretched, focusing her mind like she was back in dojo. When she was in control of her body, she kicked again. And again. And again, until light started to show through the edges of the locker. And again, until the door was so bent that the three hinges and the locking bolt were the only points of contact between it and the frame.

And one last time, so that it bent far enough that the bolt was no longer seated in the hasp and the door swung free.

Julie shot from the locker, hands half raised and ready to look either threatening or terrified, depending on which seemed more useful.

There was no one on the whole deck: the airlock, the suit storage room where she'd spent the last eight days, a half dozen other storage rooms. All empty. She plucked a magnetized pipe wrench of suitable size for skull cracking out of an EVA kit, then went down the crew ladder to the deck below.

And then the one below that, and then the one below that. Personnel cabins in crisp, almost military order. Commissary, where there were signs of a struggle. Medical bay, empty. Torpedo bay. No one. The comm station was unmanned, powered down, and locked. The few sensor logs that still streamed showed no sign of the *Scopuli.* A new dread knotted her gut. Deck after deck and room after room empty of life. Something had happened. A radiation leak. Poison in the air. Something that had forced an evacuation. She wondered if she'd be able to fly the ship by herself.

But if they'd evacuated, she'd have heard them going out the

airlock, wouldn't she?

She reached the final deck hatch, the one that led into engineering, and stopped when the hatch didn't open automatically. A red light on the lock panel showed that the room had been sealed from the inside. She thought again about radiation and major failures. But if either of those was the case, why lock the door from the inside? And she had passed wall panel after wall panel. None of them had been flashing warnings of any kind. No, not radiation, something else.

There was more disruption here. Blood. Tools and containers in disarray. Whatever had happened, it had happened here. No, it had started here. And it had ended behind that locked door.

It took two hours with a torch and prying tools from the machine shop to cut through the hatch to engineering. With the hydraulics compromised, she had to crank it open by hand. A gust of warm wet air blew out, carrying a hospital scent without the antiseptic. A coppery, nauseating smell. The torture chamber, then. Her friends would be inside, beaten or cut to pieces. Julie hefted her wrench and prepared to bust open at least one head before they killed her. She floated down.

The engineering deck was huge, vaulted like a cathedral. The fusion reactor dominated the central space. Something was wrong with it. Where she expected to see readouts, shielding, and monitors, a layer of something like mud seemed to flow over the reactor core. Slowly, Julie floated toward it, one hand still on the ladder. The strange smell became overpowering.

The mud caked around the reactor had structure to it like nothing she'd seen before. Tubes ran through it like veins or airways. Parts of it pulsed. Not mud, then.

Flesh.

An outcropping of the thing shifted toward her. Compared to the whole, it seemed no larger than a toe, a little finger. It was Captain Darren's head.

"Help me," it said.

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